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Writing Roles of Masculinity: A Look at Black Characterization and Reception

The call for minority representation in Hollywood has risen steadily over the past decade, where films that write characters into empowered, masculine roles have seen frequent reigns in popularity, yet seem to continue to fall short of expectation. Writing a rounded, driven, and confident character does not guarantee audiences will identify with, or even acknowledge the legitimacy of that character's representation—an issue that has become increasingly present with Hollywood's continued fixation on the role of the empowered black male. The question boils down to authenticity: why is it that some characters, even if written with similar traits and goals, can be seen through vastly different interpretations? Is it the settings the characters are placed in that determine this realness, or the cultural representation of the characters themselves, that make them appear more relatable? For most audiences, the answer appears to be a combination of the two—to feel truly authentic, ethnically and individually, a character has to not only embody the same awareness of their contexts that the audiences themselves are able to see, but must navigate those contexts in a way that both allows audiences to feel compelled, and empathetic, towards their decisions.

We can view these conclusions through comparing Sidney Poitier's role of Tibbs in *In the Heat of the Night*, to Jamie Foxx's Django in *Django: Unchained*—two movies that, initially, one would think would have little in common. *Heat* follows the unlikely partnership between Tibbs and Gillespie, black detective and white police chief, within the racial politics of a prejudiced Mississippi town; *Django* follows the unlikely partnership of Django and Schultz, freed slave-turned-bounty hunter and German bounty hunter-turned-emancipator, within the

racial politics of Southern plantation society. One occurs in a sandbox-world of the 1960s, the other in a fantasized backdrop of the mid-1800s. One is a neo-noir crime drama, a classic “buddy film”; the other a neo-western pastiche. On the surface, these films couldn’t be more different—but strip both down to their core, and you have three central similarities: the role of the main character, an empowered black male who uses authority and/or violence to place themselves above the racist systems they navigate; the role of the white secondary character, who is aware of those racial systems and expected to uphold them, yet allows the main character to act as they please; and the role of the social context itself, one of racial segregation and stereotyping built on the legacy of slavery and white supremacy.

Despite these similarities, Poitier’s and Foxx’s performances drew varied responses from audiences. The key criticism falls, naturally, on the screenwriter: both films employ a white voice to write about racism through a black man’s perspective. This can often draw audiences away from being able to empathize with a character at all, a sentiment built on a legacy of resisting spectatorship, which challenges the authority, and continuation, of white writers to use characters of color as vehicles of fantasized reality. Diawara states in her article, “*Black Spectatorship*,” that black characters are often drawn for the pleasure of white spectators rather than for their own audiences, done through the portrayal of blacks as less threatening to whites through assimilation into white society, often with their own cultural customs detached and appropriated into something more acceptable (71). Therefore, the portrayal of black characters and their experiences through white authors immediately deems them less relatable, by the assumption that they are written for the pleasure of white audiences and appealing to a “white” characterization—either so unsterotypical in their portrayal that audiences’ own concepts of

blackness have been stripped full from the characters, or either being stereotypical enough that they understandable and enjoyable for any audience to watch.

These criticisms have been applied to Poitier's filmography, in particular, for nearly the entirety of his career. Following the ideal that climbing the social ladder in a racist society meant beating whites at their own game, Poitier's approach towards film has been described as "perfect for the time" (Williams 110), playing sensitive and morally decent characters who displayed only platonic care towards women and a complete disregard for violence (Williams 114)—the quintessential unthreatening and uncriticizable representation of the black male. During the civil rights era, where the image of the violent and unapproachable black villain continued to permeate media, this role was imperative to help social progress in a period where characters like Poitier's did not exist. The double-edge to this reality, however, was that characters like Poitier's became the only acceptable image for society, an unintended consequence born from being the only black lead in Hollywood during this time period, and subsequently the only mass image of an upstanding black male for white audiences: attractive, asexual, well-spoken, and non-violent (Willis 24). For black audiences, this created a stark divide—you were either a Poitier, without visible ties to ideas of "blackness" aside from color, or fell into a multitude of negative stereotypes perpetrated within Hollywood since its foundation; neither were desirable.

Poitier's role of Tibbs in *Heat* was met with mixed reception. On one hand, the frustrations of being kept in "place" by racial hierarchy was able to be cathartically released through Tibbs' refusal to submit to the demands of inferiority placed upon him. On the other hand, however, audiences were still met with the idealistic, fantastical role that Tibbs characterizes, one that creates a godlike fantasy of the untouchable black man in a position of power. Throughout the film, Tibbs makes visible effort to show that he does not belong

anywhere below the white men who look down on him, but rather deserves to stand beside, and at times above them. The scene at the Endicott plantation creates the most visual expression of this, as Tibbs clashes with Endicott himself, the film's embodiment of the town's expectation of black inferiority, who presumes that threat of violence will keep black men in their place.

Endicott strikes him, to assert racial dominance; yet without interference from Gillespie, Tibbs immediately strikes back. This moment—"the slap"—became iconic due to the message it represented, one of the most satisfying visuals of black agency for audiences whose ability to do so had historically been revoked, both in cinema and in reality (Harris, "*In the Heat of the Night*"). At his core, this is what Tibbs signifies as a character: an exemplification of fighting back. He is an outsider within the film's setting, and yet wastes no time in giving proof for what qualifies him to be there—his race, despite being at the forefront of his social capital, does not reign over his authority as a detective and as a member of the police—a social position typically reserved for white men—and it is that authority that drives him to demand that he be given the equal respect he deserves. And it's *gratifying*. At every instance where his position is challenged due to his race, it is this literal badge that is argued, and again and again throughout the film, we see Tibbs continuing to gain that power. From beginning to end, he stays grounded in these morals—a reflection of the stoic character Poitier often plays through every role—and by the film's conclusion, his motives as a character have not changed; the opinions of the white audiences, however, are meant to.

For audiences of color, there is no deeper message. This film, like so many others, is scripted with the intent of changing white minds about race; *Heat* exists in an experimental flask with two opposing elements—white and black, both carrying their prejudices, a narrative product of an era where positive relationships between those of other races were often represented as the

result of forced companionship—where the ultimate solution is that the white male’s perspective is what transforms through their interaction with the just and honorable black male. This individualistic approach to the concept of racism is built on the idealistic message that any person—or, in this case, any white person—has ability to choose to change from their bigotry and contribute to the end of racism. In conclusion: white audiences are meant to identify with Gillespie, so who identifies with Tibbs? It is for this reason Poitier’s characters as a whole have faced so much criticism: his actions are sympathetic, the situations he is placed in are relatable, but the role he embodies is a visionary utopian, something that, in and of itself, is a “magical reconciliation” between racial groups, that only exists excluded from the presence of any other black actors (Willis 25). Poitier is not meant to be identified *with*, he is meant to be an icon *of*—a symbolic, metaphorical, and recognizable representation of the black experience, from which white audiences are meant to listen and learn from, and black audiences are meant to be spoken for.

Jamie Foxx’s Django, on the other hand, both uproots and reassembles these conventions in *Django: Unchained*. Where Tibbs in *Heat*, and Poitier as a whole, represents a sort of untouchable moral overseer, a manifestation of black identity placed into a position of power through his assimilation into a traditionally white authoritarian role, Django represents the opposite: a symbol of untouchable masculinity characterized by the use of violence, particularly towards and against whites and the system of white supremacy. To deconstruct racial hierarchy, Tibbs, like Poitier, seeks to beats whites at their own game; Django seeks to destroy the game entirely. Django’s role is not one that reinforces black masculinity in the face of racism, it is one that establishes black masculinity within a system where being black and being a man could not coexist; the concept of manhood in the Antebellum South was reserved for white men,

legitimized through the owning of both property and slaves, and as such Django's demand to be acknowledged as a freed slave—a man—is an active defiance against the system of slavery itself (Cherry 2). The film visualizes this, similar to *Heat*, through direct confrontations with white plantation owners and the social politics they uphold; however, the message produced through these confrontations is the complete opposite. In the Endicott scene, *Heat* suggests that Tibbs is able to gain masculinity and authority by assimilating into the system of white hierarchy: his position as a police officer stands above his race, giving him power in a system where his color would otherwise disenfranchise him. In the scene with Big Daddy at his plantation, as well as in the film's conclusion, *Django* suggests that Django is able to gain masculinity and authority through his refusal to submit to, and literal destruction of the system of white hierarchy, instead leaving society to be remade by the choices of resisting individuals.

While both films therefore appeal to a certain individualistic approach to racism, the differences in how these characters navigate those choices are what set them apart. For most modern audiences, *Django* paints the picture of a character who is able to step outside of racial politics, ones that are omnipresent in minority existence, and instead chooses to uproot and completely reinvent those systems. *Django*'s revenge fantasy appeals to broader audiences, both modern and from the past, for that reason; there is no message of reconciliation and assimilation promoted, no historical narrative built on the idea of "blackness" being something that requires change in order to adapt to social "whiteness". White audiences, particularly white liberals who set themselves apart from the histories of racism (and who may identify for that reason with Schultz, the liberal outsider in the racist South), can also find satisfaction in *Django*'s narrative, but at its core they are not the audience being appealed to; their manifestation of power is not being celebrated, though their morals are perhaps being questioned. Django is meant to be a hero

for his audience, if a fantasy, but ultimately an individual to connect to, to draw inspiration from, and to empathize with.

Comparing Django and Tibbs on further levels, there are many qualities Django possesses that Tibbs, and Poitier's characters in general, do not. Tibbs has no ulterior motive aside from stepping in to fix the prejudices of a select few in a small Mississippi town. He exists to be the outside overseer and criticizer of the racism projected onto him, and acts ultimately as an example for how people of color should handle prejudice and stereotyping, and how prejudiced Southern whites should recognize their wrongs. Django, on the other hand, does have an ulterior motive: saving his wife and enacting revenge on those responsible for tearing them apart, claiming her, and harming her. The romantic intimacy portrayed through this is something completely void in Tibbs, and for that reason Django is able to feel significantly more empathetic. His drive throughout the film is gaining power for the purpose of rescuing his wife and bringing justice to those who wronged them, and that drive starts from the moment he's freed to the final act where Candyland, and those who were partly the source of Broomhilda's and many others' miseries, is destroyed. The power Django builds throughout the film through his bounty hunting and use of violence is not done for the purpose of gaining respect from white plantation owners, it's done for the purpose of protecting his wife and himself from any harm they or the system they uphold can cause them. This message is one that speaks to a significantly wider audience than *Heat*'s individualistic call-to-action; it is one that resonates with any who have felt firsthand the need to protect and defend oneself from the dangers of racialized systems, done through a visual and visceral representation of the frustrations against them and the acknowledgement of their evils, not the advocacy to assimilate within them. Django's motives

are empathetic, justifiable, and satisfying in ways that Tibbs' similar uses of masculinity simply are not, and that difference boils down to intended audience.

Why is it, then, that a historical fantasy written on the backdrop of plantation slavery feels more true than a crime drama written as a response to the 1960s? *Django* certainly is not without its own faults, and plenty of arguments can be made against its use of slavery as a tool for entertainment and the objectification of the black bodies within it. In Hooks' "The Oppositional Gaze," the focal issue laid out towards narratives like these is that though audiences of color are able to identify with the characters represented, it is often through unintended ways which build upon a longstanding resistance against the symbols used to create the greater narrative of a film through the use of black bodies (202). Aside from *Django*, the images of slaves in the film are meant to bolster the horrific characterizations of the white characters, and are often presented without their own senses of agency (though, towards the film's end, we do see other black men aside from *Django* responding to his acts of defiance with something like admiration, perhaps a representation of the way audiences of color should ultimately respond to him as well).

Even with the validity of these arguments, however, *Django* indisputably carries a characterization that reaches far deeper than Tibbs, because of the way he chooses to interact not within the society of racism itself, but outside of it. This separation between both films speaks to a variety of factors: the difference in social knowledge in the present compared to in the 1960s, the difference in public opinion towards what types of narratives (revenge fantasy vs. social drama) are more enjoyable, and ultimately the importance of the ways those narratives are represented. Understanding the contexts of a film, the character's placement within them, and the motive of the screenwriter's choice for both can have significant impacts on how audiences react

towards characters, but it seems that to create an realistic, resonating story through a black male protagonist, what is needed is depth; an emotional understanding of the world he lives in, a drive to fight against the systems that seek to restrict him, and an embodiment of masculinity: a man who loves, who protects, and who fights.

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